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The Reversal of Fortune of Revolutionary Parties

Was the triumph of the communist revolution in China during the early twentieth century a foregone conclusion? The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) certainly believes it was: In a fiercely held narrative, the CCP maintains that the social, economic, and political conditions of the time destined it to be the one chosen by the Chinese people, once and for all. Nonetheless, the CCP in 1935 bore little resemblance to the dominant political party it is today; its membership had dwindled to 40,000, and its remaining military forces were besieged by the Kuomintang's (KMT) troops in Shaanxi. Few could have foreseen the CCP's swift victory over the KMT in the 1946–1949 Civil War, and even the CCP leaders were surprised by the rapid collapse of the KMT.[1]

The reversal of fortune between the CCP and the KMT was arguably among the most astonishing developments in the history of revolutionary movements. Throughout much of the Republican Era, most domestic and international observers anticipated the KMT's domination as China's ruling party. Their judgment seemed indisputable because KMT membership consistently outpaced that of the CCP in the Republican Era (Figure 1.1); in fact, the KMT drove the CCP to the brink of extinction twice – in 1927 and 1935.[2] The Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) was widely considered a critical juncture that gave rise to communism in China (Johnson 1962; Koss 2018). Although the CCP membership grew from 40,000 in 1937 to 1.2 million in 1945, the growth of KMT membership dwarfed CCP achievement, increasing from 1.5 million to

[1] The CCP leaders had anticipated prolonged warfare with the KMT at the time. See Chen (1998), Pepper (1999), and Coble (2023) for the collapse of the KMT government during the period of 1946–1948.

[2] The CCP membership shrank by 75 percent in 1927 during the aftermath of the anti-Communist purge and declined by another 90 percent by the end of the Long March in 1935.

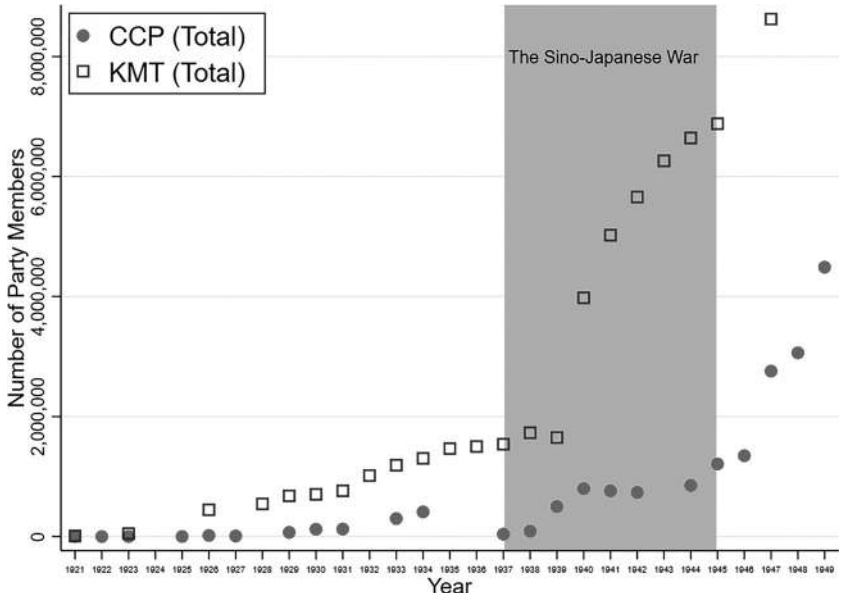

FIGURE 1.1 Membership of the CCP and the KMT (1921–1949)
Note: Author's data. See Appendix A for detailed data and their sources. The shaded area indicates the period of the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945).

6.8 million during the same period. Even the Soviet Union placed its bets on the KMT, not once but twice, supplying greater financial and military support to the KMT than to the CCP during the First United Front (1924–1927) and the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945).[3]

The reversal of fortune of the CCP and the KMT serves as a reminder that outcomes are far from certain for those living through revolutionary movements; most of which involve violent repression that brings them to their knees. The revolutionary movements in Algeria, Eritrea, and Bolivia were beset with internal factional division amid external repression, and existential threats failed to unify party elites and engender a resilient political party. The revolutionary movement in Vietnam was all but dead from 1930 to 1941, when the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) repeatedly fell victim to external repression. Most revolutionary movements were born weak, and even the successful ones often caught both domestic and international observers off guard (Levitsky and Way 2022).

Earlier scholarship on revolutions highlights broader political, societal, and international contexts as well as historical, preexisting social ties and

[3] For Soviet aid to the CCP and the KMT, see Yang (2011), Wan (2005), and Zhu (2007). Figure 3.2 offers some comparison of Soviet aid to the CCP and the KMT from 1922 to 1927.

organizations;[4] but little is dedicated to understanding the organizational development of revolutionary entities amid violent struggles.[5] Although the collapse of old regimes and foreign intervention are crucial for creating political openings for revolutionary movements, not all such organizations manage to seize the opportunity: Behind every successful revolution lie countless failed insurrections. Anarchy and failed states are the more common outcomes following regime collapse. If the outcomes of revolutions are at the mercy of the agents involved, one cannot fully grasp the dynamics of revolutions without understanding the sources of the organizational strength of these entities. Indeed, the Chinese communist revolution would not have succeeded without the CCP's transformation from a frail and marginalized party into a disciplined and effective one, an observation shared even by Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the KMT, in his own reflections (Eastman 1981).

Upon closer examination, the organizational changes occurring within the CCP and the KMT appear paradoxical because they contradict the conventional wisdoms surrounding authoritarian politics and revolutions. A prominent view of authoritarian politics emphasizes power sharing through institutions such as political parties and legislatures as the cornerstone of regime resilience. Key to this line of reasoning is that power sharing among political elites allows them to access the spoils of office and engenders elite cohesion.[6] Nonetheless, the downfall of the KMT followed closely on the heels of repeatedly faltering power-sharing arrangements and elite cooptation. Furthermore, the revival of the CCP was preceded by Mao Zedong's emergence as a dominant party leader, a marked contrast to the earlier period when the CCP experienced contested leadership and fragile party organization. In fact, the emergence of strong authoritarian regimes, such as China, Cuba, Eritrea, and Vietnam, has frequently been characterized by a strong political party with a dominant leader.

How can we explain the reversal of fortune of the CCP and the KMT, where a dominant leader led to successful transformation of the CCP's organization while power sharing among party elites resulted in an ineffective party organization and eventually undermined the KMT's dominance? More generally, why do some political parties succeed in overcoming adversity and

[4] See, for example, Eisenstadt (1978), Goodwin (2001), Moore (1966), Paige (1975), Skocpol (1979), Trimberger, (1978), and Wolf (1969). Goldstone (1980) offers an excellent review of this third generation of scholarship on revolutions.

[5] In studies of social movements, scholars have uncovered the importance of formal and informal mass mobilization through *preexisting* social ties and organizations but less about how these organizations evolve during the process of revolutionary struggle. See Gould (1995), Magagna (1991), Parsa (2000), Stokes (1993), Van Vugt (1991), and Wickham-Crowley (1992).

[6] Scholars of authoritarian politics have offered some compelling theoretical arguments and empirical evidence for this line of argument. See, for example, Blayde (2010), Brownlee (2007), Gandhi (2008), Geddes (1999), Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2018), Magaloni (2006, 2008), Pepinsky (2007), and Svolik (2009).

transforming into robust political organizations that seize state power while others fail? These are the central inquiries that I aim to answer by examining through the lens of the organizational transformation of the CCP and the KMT in China's Republican Era.

1.1 ARGUMENT IN BRIEF

My central argument is that *domination* and *mobilization* are pivotal for the triumph of revolutionary parties. To become dominant, revolutionary parties must develop the infrastructure to mobilize not only committed individuals but also financial resources; and to mobilize effectively, the party must have a dominant leader who resolves intraparty elite conflict and facilitates building party mobilization infrastructure.

The theoretical framework centers on three claims. First, power consolidation by a party leader rather than power sharing among party elites strengthens party organization. In weak institutional environments, the emergence of a dominant party leader alleviates conflicts stemming from contested party leadership. Second, the success of a revolutionary party lies in its ability to mobilize crucial financial resources, not merely its ability to recruit committed activists. Resource mobilization plays a foundational yet often overlooked role in party strength during a protracted violent struggle. Finally, contingent events could shift the balance of power among party elites and alter the comparative advantage of party mobilization infrastructure, which in turn disrupt the equilibria of elite conflict and party strength. Viewed through this lens, the rise of the CCP and the downfall of the KMT were not preordained; instead, the reversal of fortune of these two parties arose from evolving dynamics in intraparty elite power struggles and the shifting comparative advantage of their respective mobilization infrastructures, both shaped by contingent events and unforeseen circumstances.

Figure 1.2 encapsulates the essence of my argument. In what follows, I first define the primary subject of interest in this book and then elaborate on the logic behind this theoretical framework.

1.1.1 Definition of Revolutionary Party

The primary interest of this book revolves around political entities seeking to capture state power through protracted, violent struggle, rather than through

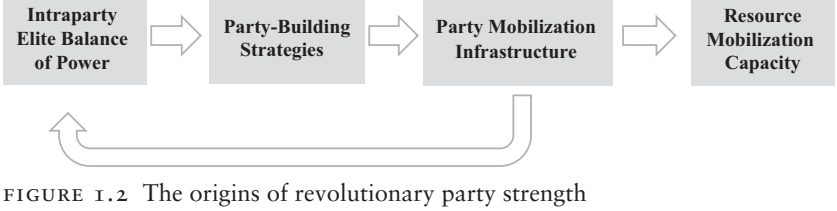

FIGURE 1.2 The origins of revolutionary party strength

electoral competition. Such entities often operate in environments where traditional political processes are either absent or ineffective. Understanding the strategies and structures these groups employ reveal the dynamics of power acquisition and state formation in contexts where conventional electoral mechanisms are not the primary means of political engagement. For the sake of simplicity, I call them revolutionary parties throughout this book[7] and adopt the following general definition based on earlier studies of revolutions and social movements: Political entities organizing formal and informal mobilization intended to overthrow a political regime through noninstitutional means, including demonstration, protest, and violence (Goldstone 2001: 142; Goodwin 2001: 9).

This minimalist definition offers two advantages by avoiding the selection of the dependent variable – investigating successful revolutions exclusively or only certain types of revolutions could result in incomplete or even misleading conclusions. Specifically, this definition embraces a wide spectrum of revolutionary entities, whose organizational forms are shaped by the strategic decisions of those driving the movement. Skocpol (1978) has distinguished two types of revolutions, suggesting that in social revolution "basic changes in social structure and in political structure occur together in a mutually reinforcing fashion, [whereas] political revolutions transform state structures but not social structures" (4–5). Social and political revolutions are, however, often intertwined. Some political revolutions originated as social revolutions, but political entities later adopted an accommodationist path without significantly restructuring the society (Levitsky and Way 2022). The exclusive focus on either social or political revolutions overlooks the strategic decisions on revolutionary strategies by political actors over the course of the political and social movements.

Second, this broad definition includes political organizations that instigate "revolutions from above" led by elites who directly control the mobilization movement and who may not always pursue radical social transformation (Trimberger 1978). The process of revolutions rarely follows a blueprint or a script fulfilling a specific purpose. Instead, revolutionary parties improvise distinct strategies when facing opportunities and constraints at various points in time. Skocpol (1979) maintained that "a purposive image is just as misleading about the processes and outcomes of historical revolutions as it is about their causes" (17). Depicted in this book, the evolution of the organizational structure of revolutionary parties arises from strategic calculations improvised by party leaders in response to internal and external pressures. These considerations change the course of party-building strategies targeting certain segments of the population for the development of their mobilization infrastructure.

[7] See Chapter 2 on the scope conditions of this conceptualization relative to other political entities, stemming from independence movements and insurgencies.

1.1.2 Argument 1: The Curse of Power Sharing and the Blessing of a Dominant Party Leader

When does a revolutionary party succeed in building an effective mobilization infrastructure? I argue that power consolidation by a dominant party leader, but not power sharing among a group of party elites under contested leadership, strengthens party building. At the heart of my argument lies the notion that party elites are constantly confronted with three concerns stemming from any party-building endeavor: a free-rider problem, distributional conflict, and ex ante uncertainty about party-building outcomes. Consequently, party elites under contested party leadership often pursue strategies benefiting their own power even if the party faces existential threats. The emergence of a dominant party leader, however, mitigates these concerns, thereby facilitating intraparty elite cohesion that strengthens party mobilization infrastructure.

My argument roots in two premises. First, party elites inherently yearn to reach the pinnacle of party hierarchy. Their desire is not only driven by personal ambition, but also by the belief that power accumulation is necessary to advance their preferred policies. This is true even for revolutionaries motivated by ideological orientation rather than personal ambition. Second, party elites are endowed with a variety of sources of power, which manifest in their de facto power within the party. For instance, some party elites' endowed source of power originates from their ability to raise financial resources; for others, it stems from their roles as power brokers to mobilize groups of actors through their personal networks and prestige. Some party elites even command the coercive apparatus that bolsters their de facto power.

Any party-building endeavors generating distinct benefits to each individual party elite in turn shape the elite's incentive to adopt specific party-building strategies. First, the total benefit of any party-building strategy – a stronger party – creates a free-rider problem, as party elites prefer to benefit from a stronger party without bearing personal costs. Thus, party elites would rather see others commit their vital resources to engage in labor-intensive party-building endeavors. Second, some party elites may disproportionately obtain more benefits from a party-building strategy than others, therefore altering the balance of power among party elites. Hence distributive conflict emerges because party elites become acutely sensitive to any potential power shifts resulted from a specific party-building strategy. Last, the party-building outcomes are often uncertain ex ante, undermining party elites' commitment to pursue party-building strategies, given that they operate in a rapidly changing revolutionary movement.

With these characteristics, the relative balance of power among party elites shapes their preferences for party-building strategies. On the one hand, party elites under contested party leadership are motivated to pursue party-building strategies that strengthen their individual source of power. That is, they prefer a party-building strategy expanding their share of benefit over a strategy that

benefits the whole because the distributional conflict overshadows the free-rider problem. Such dynamics frequently culminate in conflicting and inconsistent party-building strategies, thereby compromising the integrity and quality of party mobilization infrastructure. On the other hand, the rise of a dominant party leader alleviates the distributional conflict and free-rider problem, resulting in a coherent set of party-building strategies that strengthen the overall party mobilization infrastructure.

1.1.3 Argument 2: The Primacy of Resource Mobilization as Party Strength

Irrespective of which party-building strategy is chosen, the goal is to enhance the party mobilization infrastructure that is essential for party strength. Building on studies of social movement[8] and state capacity,[9] I define party mobilization infrastructure as collective vehicles that enable a revolutionary party to project its power onto the political system. The party mobilization infrastructure extends beyond merely soliciting political support from key sectors of society; rather, assistance from party members is sought to leverage their formal and informal networks to ensure policy compliance from the targeted population, willingly or unwillingly. Simply put, party members act as conduits to achieve the party's objectives under an effective party mobilization infrastructure.

What then is the primary objective of a revolutionary party's mobilization efforts? Earlier scholars have examined mobilization of *human resources*, that is, attracting and recruiting committed activists and fighters willing to make personal sacrifices and undertake risky actions when facing repression from existing power holders. Few, however, have emphasized the mobilization of *financial resources* despite their pivotal role in funding the operation of revolutionary parties. The need to secure stable financial resources is particularly crucial during protracted violent and nonviolent struggle against the state. Scholars have recently turned their attention to rebel taxation and governance[10] as key aspects of civil conflict beyond the greed and grievance framework developed by Collier and Hoeffler (2004).

How can party mobilization infrastructure facilitate resource mobilization? For the sake of simplicity, I conceptualize two ideal types of party mobilization infrastructure for resource mobilization. The first type entails a mass mobilization infrastructure aiming to overthrow existing elites and state

[8] I follow McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1996), who define mobilizing structures as "those collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action" (3).

[9] See Mann (1984). Slater (2010) has extended this line of logic by emphasizing the importance of state infrastructural power in his studies of contentious politics in Southeast Asia.

[10] For rebel taxation, see, for instance, Breslawski and Tucker (2022), Mampilly (2021), Mampilly and Thakur (2025), and Revkin (2020).

apparatus. This is a common type of revolutionary party, in which the establishment of grassroots organizations is prioritized, and the core party members are the powerless masses occupying the lower strata of the socioeconomic hierarchy in the society (e.g., teachers, blue-collar workers, and farmers). Communist parties in Russia, China, Cuba, and Vietnam are examples of revolutionary parties with a mass mobilization infrastructure.

The second type is an elite-centric mobilization infrastructure, in which cooperation is solicited from progressive political and economic elites who serve as power brokers on behalf of the party. Revolutionary parties with an elite mobilization infrastructure prioritize building party organizations to coopt existing national and local elites, positioning them the core party members. This type of revolutionary party often manifests in revolutions from above but it could also emerge from mass social movements when party elites recalibrate their revolutionary strategies. Many of these parties originate from independence and nationalist movements, seeking liberation from the old regime occupied or sponsored by imperial powers. The KMT, the Revolutionary Nationalist Movement (MNR) in Bolivia, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in Nicaragua, and the Congress Party in India share many characteristics of a revolutionary party with an elite mobilization infrastructure.

Notably, elite mobilization and mass mobilization infrastructures are characterized by distinct comparative advantages and trade-offs. On one hand, building an elite mobilization infrastructure is often a pragmatic strategy because the party can quickly access financial resources with the help of existing elites serving as conduits. Nonetheless, party elites face potential rebellion risks from those elites who facilitate the party's resource mobilization: The assimilation of strong economic and political elites into a party inevitably increases the difficulty in maintaining elite cohesion. Parties with elite mobilization infrastructure under contested leadership, therefore, often exhibit a mixed capacity in resource mobilization. Although they excel in extracting resources from economic elites, this approach tends to be a leaky bucket when it comes to contributing to overall party strength. Consequently, dominant leaders rarely emerge in elite-mobilization parties with coherent party-building strategies sustained over long periods.

On the other hand, building a mass mobilization infrastructure mitigates the risk of intraparty elite rebellion, but it is a labor- and resource-intensive endeavor, requiring unwavering commitment and tremendous effort by party elites. Although the initial cost of building a mass mobilization infrastructure is staggeringly high, it allows the party to better penetrate society with grassroots organizations and to replace the power structure occupied by existing elites. Nonetheless, contested leadership exacerbates the start-up challenges in the mass mobilization infrastructure, resulting in a much weaker capacity for resource mobilization than elite parties under similar circumstances.

Although the strategic calculation of party leaders may steer the direction of party-building strategies, the type of party mobilization is bound by party

TABLE 1.1 *Equilibria of elite conflict and party building*

Mobilization infrastructure	Intraparty elite conflict	Party-building strategy	Resource mobilization capacity	Examples
Elite-centric	Contested leadership	Conflictual party-building strategy	Mixed resource mobilization capacity	KMT (1928–1945) FLN in Algeria
	Dominant leadership	Coherent party-building strategy	Strong resource mobilization capacity	
Mass-centric	Contested leadership	Conflictual party-building strategy	Weak resource mobilization capacity	CCP (1927–1935) MNR in Bolivia ELF in Eritrea ICP in Vietnam
	Dominant leadership	Coherent party-building strategy	Strong resource mobilization capacity	CCP (1938–1945) EPLF in Eritrea Viet Minh in Vietnam

Note: As discussed earlier, few dominant leaders emerged in parties with an elite mobilization infrastructure.

ideologies and external political environments. Traditionally, party ideology is viewed as a signaling device that shapes the belief system for revolutionaries and promotes multigroup and cross-class coalitions.[11] Another important function of party ideology, I contend, is serving as a constraining device that ties the hands of party elites. The interparty competition from the external political environment implies that once a revolutionary party commits to a specific type of mobilization infrastructure, it falls into a state of self-reinforcing equilibrium. Any deviation from their adopted mobilization infrastructure dilutes the party brand and identity, undermining its credibility to the core constituency and generating more harm than benefit. To this end, revolutionary parties cannot pursue mixed strategies to build a broad coalition because such efforts engender internal conflict and factionalism, resulting in incoherent party-building strategies and weak mobilization infrastructure.

Table 1.1 illustrates the implications of intraparty elite conflict and diverging mobilization infrastructure for revolutionary parties' resource mobilization capacity, along with some comparative examples. Specifically, contested leadership engenders conflictual party-building strategies, crippling the party's mobilization capacity for human and financial resources, regardless of the

[11] See Goldstone (2001) for a summary of studies on the role of ideology in revolutionary movements.

type of mobilization infrastructure. As illustrated in Chapter 7, the KMT's apparent domination over the CCP from 1928 to 1945 cannot conceal the relentless intraparty conflicts among its elites, resulting in a party flush with some strength in elite resource mobilization but weak penetration into the society. The revolutionary movement of the National Liberation Front (FLN) in Algeria consisted of political elites with diverse preferences, their coalition weakly linked by a nationalistic sentiment. The party was constantly mired in conflict among these elites over party-building strategies, and its attempt to implement a collegial leadership between interior and exterior broke down (Jackson 1977).

For revolutionary parties with a mass mobilization infrastructure, persistent intraparty conflict is a luxury they cannot afford. Before the seizure of state power, mass-mobilization parties lack the direct access to state and societal resources that parties with elite mobilization infrastructures enjoy. Although the fragility of these political organizations, such as the CCP from 1927 to 1935, the MNR in Bolivia, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in Eritrea, and the ICP in Vietnam, can be attributed to a variety of domestic and international factors, the failure to resolve intraparty elite conflicts was a hallmark common to all these parties.

Once a dominant leader emerges, however, these political organizations often experience a transformation leading to resilient parties. As shown in Chapter 6, Mao Zedong's power ascendancy from 1935 to 1938 fundamentally shifted the CCP away from earlier discriminatory and self-defeating party-building strategies. This crucial transformation into a peasant-centric mobilization infrastructure became a timely preparation for the CCP's expansion in grain extraction after 1941 during the Sino-Japanese War. Meanwhile, the EPLF in Eritrea broke away from the ELF in 1977, ending the earlier efforts of the ELF to divide its mass organizations on the basis of class status. The rise of Isaias Afwerki as a dominant leader turned the party into an effective mass mobilization organization that later dominated the Eritrean political system after achieving independence in 1991 (Pool 2001; Plaut 2016). Similarly, Nguyen Ai Quoc (i.e., Ho Chi Minh) has been credited for holding the Vietnamese communist movement together (Huỳnh 1982).

1.1.4 Argument 3: Contingencies as Equilibrium Disruptor

Importantly, Figure 1.2 highlights that dominant and contested party leadership must be recognized as self-perpetuating equilibria, resulting in divergent paths for party-building strategies and ultimately impacting party strength. Contested leadership breeds conflictual party-building strategies in which elites seek to bolster their own power sources while undermining their intraparty rivals, only further intensifying intraparty elite conflicts. Conversely, dominant leadership mitigates elite conflict and paves the way for the development of mobilization infrastructure that solidifies the party leader's power base.